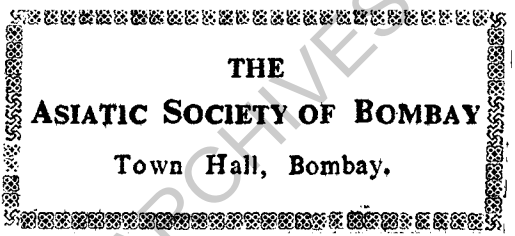
BRIEF SKETCH

OF THE

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE ASSAMESE PEOPLE

00045509

JAC
294.5.5
Gho/Boi
45509



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Digitized with financial assistance from

NSDL
Technology, Trust & Reach

on 16 November, 2018

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

A

BRIEF SKETCH

OF THE

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE ASSAMESE PEOPLE.

BY

M. N. GHOSH, M.A

(Bachelor in Law)

45509

OF THE

PROVINCIAL CIVIL SERVICE, ASSAM.

——:o:——

PRINTED AT THE METHODIST PUBLISHING HOUSE,
45, DHARAMTALA STREET,
CALCUTTA.

1896.

All Rights Reserved.

[PRI[redacted]

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

SIR WILLIAM ERSKINE WARD, M.A., I.C.S., K.C.S.I.

CHIEF COMMISSIONER OF ASSAM

THIS LITTLE BOOK IS RESPECTFULLY

DEDICATED BY

THE AUTHOR.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

00045509

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

PREFACE.

OR

THE AUTHOR'S APOLOGY.

It was never the intention of the author (if he can lay claim to this title without being considered presumptuous) to publish this book. Perhaps it would have been well, had it never found its way to print as the writer is fully conscious that he has not been able to do to the subject the requisite amount of justice it deserves. This chiefly for press of time. But a two-fold reason led him to the step to which he has committed himself now. First, it appeared to those who were best able to pronounce an opinion on the book that a knowledge of the facts briefly touched in it might possibly help the enquiring, if not the inquisitive, public of these days to understand about a people who hold no mean a position in the vast Empire of our benign Sovereign and (as the author may add) to see how their ancestors, even while the orgies of fetichism of the hills were echoing on their ears, were not altogether able to forget the claims of theism. Secondly, as it happens sometimes in the economy of the universe, viz, great things have a small origin, these few jottings may only lead to a discovery and bring abler hands on the field to take up the researches of a tract of country which must have a political, or socio-religious and political mixed history of its own as all history of the Indian people is inseparable from their religion. The author submits therefore the above few

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

remarks by way of an apology to the consideration of an indulgent public who will no longer, it is trusted, lay the charge of effrontery at his door for what he has done.

The best thanks of the author are due to C. J. Lyall Esq., M.A., L.L.D., C.I.E., I.C.S., who was once in this Province but now Chief Commisioner of the Central Provinces, India; R. R. Pope Esq., I.C.S. District and Sessions Judge, Dinagepur, Bengal and E. A. Gait Esq., I.C.S., Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam for the many valuable hints they kindly gave, and the suggestions they made after perusal of this little sketch which was written a long time ago and while it yet remained in M.S. form. All these have been carefully acted upon in putting the book through the Press. The last-mentioned gentleman especially showed consideration so far as to condescend taking a notice of this humble production in his Census Report for Assam, 1891 (Vide Assam Census Report 1891, Vol. I, Part. II, Chap. III "Religion," page 82, footnote) and regretted the non-publication of it. It is this circumstance chiefly which induced the author to make it no longer a question of diffidence but lay the book at the feet of the generous public in its present form.

Sylhet, 1896. } THE AUTHOR.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

THE FOUNDERS OF THE SEVERAL RELIGIOUS SECTS OF ASSAM.

PART I—SECTION I.

THE FOUNDERS OF THE SEVERAL VAISNAVIC RELIGIOUS SECTS OF ASSAM.

How Sunkar's ancestors came into Assam.

At the dawn of the 12th century or a few decades back, Goureshwar reigned over a portion of Assam. He ruled well. Much of the success of his rule he owed to his favourite minister Mahendra, a man whose far-sighted policy obtained for him the first place in the royal household. This however excited the jealousy of other courtiers who being unable to cope with the talent of this Daniel, tried every opportunity to prejudice him in the mind of his master. It so chanced that the unfortunate man had a son who having free access to the king's harem became intimate with one of his daughters.* It is not clearly known whether this intimacy was of more than a childish

* "Queen" according to the account of the "*Burunji*" of Babu Gunavi Ram Barua. Vide foot-note on 3rd page.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

nature but the circumstance was not lost sight of by his father's enemies. They reported the matter to the king with a colouring of their own. They waited an opportunity for detection and on a certain dark day the king himself came upon the juvenile pair while they were engaged in a game of dice. No further proof was necessary and nothing short of the slaughter of the offender whose flesh was to supply a feast to the father would appease the infuriated king. * Mahendra was invited to a banquet and the cooked flesh of his son was given to him to eat. It is even said that while eating he was questioned by his majesty if he found the particular dish agreeable to his palate. However this may be, it is certain that the minister discovered what had happened and resolved to leave the kingdom of his persecutor. He put his family and valuables into a boat and moved downward towards Bengal. The journey from Upper Assam took some days. Hence although he took good care to travel by routes that were little known, he was unable to elude the vigilant eye of his pursuers but was overtaken upon the waters of what is now known as *Kachra Bheel*, a large pool near Bahari, a beautiful village in Mouza (Pergunnah) Chenga in the District of Kamrup. There is a legend here that Mahendra did not allow the members

* Vide next foot-note.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

of his household to fall as victims into the hands of the king's men but that he himself sank the boat and destroyed his family saving himself by some miraculous power. He then escaped by some stratagem to the dominions of Dharmeshwar king of Kanaijpur. There is a little obscurity as to who this prince was, but it is most probable that he founded his kingdom on the ruins of the Pal dynasty of Bengal. The escaped minister after having made a representation of his case promised Dharmeshwar every aid in the acquisition of the territory ruled by Goureshwar and thus induced the former to come out with an army against the latter. The two armies met somewhere near the present site of the town of Goalpara (some say on the site of village Hadira in Barpeta Sub-Division close to the river Brahmaputra) and several skirmishes took place, neither being able to get any advantage over the other. At last peace was made and Goureshwar pressed Dharmeshwar to deliver Mahendra into his hands. But this the generous prince Dharmeshwar refused to do, making over instead seven Brahmins and seven Kaisthas to the king of Assam. This is how the superior Hindu castes stepped into Assam.*

* Babu Gunavi Ram Barua also makes reference to the incidenst which are embraced in this narrative in his "*Assam Burunji*," pp. 45 and 48. But his story seems to be disjointed and the two isolated accounts do not connect together and explain all the attendant circumstances so well as this continuous history does. There are again noticeable discrepancies between this account and that given in the "*Burunji*."

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Chandivar, ancestor of Sunkar and Brahmagiri, ancestor of Madhav were two of the Kaisthas that were thus made over to Goureshwar. Goureshwar assigned to these Brahmins and Kaisthas some lands from which they were required to raise their livelihood. The employment however did not suit them, unaccustomed as they were to the work of cultivation, and Chandivar and Brahmagiri left secretly the dominion of the Assam Prince. They returned to their native country and while Brahmagiri settled at Banduka, Chandivar reappeared at Kanaijpur whence he was sent in bonds to Goureshwar under the orders of Dharmeshwar. He was committed to dungeon by Goureshwar because of his acting the run-away and thus lingered for some time in the prison house. It was at this time that the learned *pundits* of Nuddea, Benares, Santipur, &c., paid their usual visit to the court of Goureshwar. While there they puzzled the savants of the kingdom with many subtle and erudite questions which no one was able to answer until at length Chandivar engaged them, vanquished them, and drove them from the country in ignominy. This circumstance purchased for Chandivar his freedom. The king was pleased and rewarded him with the chief rank of *Bhuyan* over twelve houses. This may be regarded as the origin of *Bhuyanship* in Assam although opinions vary on the point. Chandivar was further assigned the ancient place called Ali Pukhari

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

near Borduar in Nowgong. Chandivar had no issue. A blessing was therefore pronounced upon him by the King's subjects and at length he got a son who was named Rajyadhar or the gift of the Kingdom. Rajyadhar was also without any son and betook himself to worshipping the sun and was rewarded with a son who was Suryavar or the gift of the sun. Suryavar's son was Kusumgiri, a worshipper of Siva. Sunkar Dev was the son of this man.

Birth and Childhood.

Sunkar, the founder of the Mahapurusiya sect, was born at Ali Pukhari close by the site of present Borduar. He was of the Bhuyan family and a Kaistha by birth. Mahendra Kundali was his tutor. During his early years he showed a love for religion and at a tender age undertook a pilgrimage to the sacred places of Bengal.

Religion prevalent at the time of his birth.

The people of the place where he was born, were, like the people of Bengal, divided into the two great sects of the Hindus, the *Saivas* and the *Saktas*. Sunkar manifested great aversion to idolatry from his boyhood and set his heart to the study of the *Vedas* and *Vedantas* from which he hoped to extract a purer form of religion. But he was in an unsettled state of mind for sometime, and while still undecided, received from one Jaggannath Misra who had before had opportunity of holding

Unsettled State of mind.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

religious discourses with him, a copy of the *Bhagvat*.

Decision of mind.

The book arrived in time to enable him to make a choice and he at once took to translating portions of it in the vernacular of the province. The finished compilation composed his *sastras* (Scripture) and on the basis of it he propounded the teaching of one God only.

Domestic relations.

His domestic relations at this period must be told. Subsequent to his return from pilgrimage to Ali Pukhuri, the seat of his family abode, he married Ali Kati Ai who left him a daughter and shortly after died. He took a second wife on the death of the first one and shifted to Borduar in hope of better accomodation. His second wife was Kalindi.

Visit to Bengal.

At Borduar he lived for twelve years. At this time Chaitanya was preaching Vaisnavism in Bengal. Sunkar had heard of this, and one of the objects of the pilgrimage referred to above was to visit Chaitanya and receive edification from him. Accordingly he left for Bengal with his contemporaries Hari Dev and Damodar Dev, who were to become hereafter leaders of two different sects. Sunkar, Hari Dev and Damodar Dev were accompanied in their journey by Ram Ram Guru, Sunkar's family priest. It is said that Chaitanya at first refused to see Sunkar because he was a Sudra but such an act would

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

be so opposed to what we know of Chaitanya's character, that we cannot believe it to be true. After this visit the three returned to Upper Assam. Henceforward Sunkar publicly preached the Vaisnav religion as taught in the *Bhagvat*, from which, as has been stated above, he had already picked up suitable teachings.

Persecutions.

Chuhamung was the reigning king then. He was of the Ahom dynasty. Sunkar's avowed renunciation of all forms of idolatry created for him a host of enemies in the Brahmins. They charged him with sedition before the king. He was accused of imparting instructions which tended to keep up a spirit of disaffection among the King's subjects, and to draw them away from all religion whatever. The charge however fell to the ground at the trial. About this time the raids of the Kachari Mannas * into the country became more frequent than ever and Sunkar removed a little further up and settled at a place called Kumrákátá, close by Dhongahati. While here he got acquainted with Madhav an account of whom will be given in another place.

Move from Upper Assam.

Meanwhile affairs made it impossible for Sunkar to remain at his new place for a longer time. Chuhamung, although he found no accusation worthy of credit against Sunkar, was

* An aboriginal hill-tribe.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

however prejudiced in mind against the Bhuyans. Requisition upon requisition came upon Sunkar and his adherents who found it hard sometimes to obey the royal mandates. Finally an order came from the king to assist his agents in the capture of wild elephants in the quarters where Sunkar and his followers resided. Sunkar either offered no help or did not take sufficient care to provide for the safety of the palisades inside which the traps had been thrown up and the consequence was that all the entrapped animals made their escape. The king's fury knew no bounds and he sent officers to seize the persons of Sunkar and of the other Bhakats.

Sunkar could not be found but Madhav and Hari (who married Sunkar's daughter by his first wife) were arrested and brought before the king. Hari was beheaded at once and Madhav incarcerated. However after a few months Madhav was set free and he fled and met Sunkar at Dhonga. Both of them then decided to remain no longer at the place and set out on their journey towards Barpeta.

At this stage it will be convenient to halt awhile and see who were the other leaders of religious thought in the country at this time, reserving till afterwards our account of Sunkar's religious tenets. To mix up biographical details with an account of religion would only lead to confusion.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

To begin then. At the period when Sunkar pitched at Barpeta, Kamrup and the tracts lying to the west of it were under the Kuch Behar kings. * Barpeta was then thinly peopled, and the leading castes worth noticing were (1) the Brahmins, (2) Kalitas, (3) Charals, (4) Doms, (5) Kaibartas, (6) Saos and (7) a limited number of Kaisthas. The site which was first selected by Sunkar for abode at Barpeta is now marked by a garden called Sanpuria which forms a parcel of the Shastra lands of Barpeta. Sunkar lived here for six months, and then removed with his family to the small village of Kumar Kachi in the neighbourhood of Patbaushi because he found that the site of his first abode was subject to periodical inundations. It is said that the new place was inhabited by a large number of Chárál caste people who lived in close neighbourhood of Sunkar and one day a cat purloined a morsel of food (a half eaten fish) from the house of a Chárál family and brought it to the place where Sunkar lived. This was a source of contamination to avoid a recurrence of which, Sunkar thought fit to remove from the village. Accordingly he removed to Patbaushi and there he lived for eighteen years.

Barpeta.

Removal to Patbaushi and the forming of a Shastra.

* Conquered from the Ahom kings.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Preaching.

At Barpeta he began to preach the Bhagvat religion and set himself up both as a religious and social reformer. In this task he was greatly assisted by his favorite follower Madhav who was a man of far keener intellect than Sunkar. Removed from every kind of disturbance, and having no longer anything to fear at the hands of a despotic king, the seat of whose Kingdom was miles and miles away in the heart of the mountains, the new reformer freely taught the principles of his religion with an earnestness which won for him daily a large number of proselytes.

Invitation from Kuch Behar.

His fame soon spread, and there came an invitation from the king of Kuch Behar asking him to proceed thither. Sunkar went and had an interview with the king who was highly pleased with his discourses. This is not the only time that Sunkar visited Kuch Behar. He went there from time to time, sometimes of his own accord and sometimes in deference to the king's messages.

Death.

It was during a visit of the kind referred to that he died at a place called Kakat-Kata in Kuch Behar. He was born in the year 1449 A.D., corresponding to the year 1371 of the Sak era and died in 1568 A.D. (1490 Sak). It is said he lived altogether for 119 years, of which he devoted

Dates.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

60 years to the cause of religion. There is no means however to test the correctness of his age at his death but the fact is certain that he attained a good longevity.

It is supposed that Sunkar came to Barpeta in the third stage of his life. His second wife was then living. It seems as if he had forebodings of his death before he set out for Kuch Behar for the last time, for he appointed Madhav his successor and made final arrangements for his household.

In his last visit to Kuch Behar he was accompanied by his son Ramananda, and three of his followers Ram Rai, Hari Rai and Sharvajay. Sunkar had three sons, viz., Ramananda, Haricharan and Kamal Lochan. The first two survived their father, the third died during Sunkar's lifetime.

Sons.

I may make here a passing remark as to the character of the times when Sunkar set himself up as a reformer. It was the fifteenth century then. In the far west in Europe, Martin Luther kindled the great blaze of reformation. In the Indian Peninsula four religious reformers changed the fate of things. There was Hari Vyasa in Nepal, Ramananda in Orissa, Chaitanya in Bengal, and Sunkar in Assam. Thus to compare little things with great, the Asian reformers must have received an impulse to their religious activity from the example of the great European reformer. Universal religious

Parallel of the times.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

zeal was the key-note of the time. It would seem as if one wave of reformation was traversing the countries of the two continents and importing with itself into the religious beliefs of mankind the essential element of zeal in worship like the gulf-stream which after flowing from the Mexican channel proceeds towards the far east and brings to the western shores of Europe a genial warmth.

Character.

Sunkar was a great reformer but he never declared himself to be any *avatar*. Nor did he make the least pretension to any claim to be ranked among the gods of the Hindu pantheon. He was a man of extreme humility. It was after his death that his followers and their *chelas* looked upon him as an incarnation of Vishnu just as the Hindu people are seen to deify any one whose teachings partake of a semi-religious character. It is not correctly known how long afterwards it was that he came to be worshipped as an emanation of Vishnu. But the probability is that not long after his death, the acceptors of the new creed, not remaining content with simply giving him the rank of a reformer, surrounded the memory of their religious leader with the celestial halo of an emanation of the God-head. Sunkar was a man of austere morality and set his face vigorously against all forms of sensuality. He was a foe to all caste prejudice, yet however not always firm in

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

opposing considerations of caste. He was a man full of zeal and advocated the worship of one God only.

Salvation, according to his creed, was to be only gained by taking the name of God, and this furnishes the key-stone of the religion of the Mahapurusiyas, which consists in certain recitations of the name of God in His various attributes, supplemented with tinges of such *Pauranic* accounts as serve best to excite the religious warmth of the soul. Cruelty in any shape did not meet with his approval and he abstained from taking animal food on this account. It is to be observed that Sunkar was not the founder of any original religion. He was a mere compiler (if I may be allowed to use the expression) from the *Bhagvat* of Vysa Dev a work which discounting all other matters I may say laid down the basis of a theistic creed. He was a lover of cleanliness, but it is doubtful to what extent this habit of his is generally observed by the Mahapurusiya people. Their leader however meant little more. With him cleanliness denoted both a subjective and objective cleanliness—a cleanly heart as well as a cleanly body and not merely the outside cleanliness of the cup and the platter. In this however I doubt not he is imitated by many among his followers in the present day. These keep this golden practice in view in their daily walks of life. They are chiefly the Adhicars and Bhakats.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

MADHAV DEV.

Ancestor.

Madhav's ancestor was one of the seven Kayasthas who were given by Dharmeswar as hostages to Goureshwar the Assam King. Brahmagiri—(for this was the name of Madhav's ancestor)—after he ran away from the territory of the Assam Prince, settled at a place called Banduka in Bengal. Govind Giri *alias* Ram Kana Ata was a descendant of Brahmagiri and father of Madhav. Govind Giri while at Banduka the seat of his paternal abode, got a son named Damodar Gomasta by his first wife. Damodar Gomasta was Mazumdar to the King of Kanaijpur. Damodar having offended the King somehow, both father and son incurred the royal displeasure and fled towards Assam. A severe storm overtook them in their journey, and they took shelter with the greatest difficulty in the rock now known as Umananda (Pea-cock Hill) that lifts up its head midway in the Brahmaputra and faces the present town of Gauhati. On regaining this place father and son again parted, the former proceeding straight towards Upper Assam, the latter returning home. Govind Giri reached Borduar and met Sunkar. Govind Giri was a widower at this time, and as he was a Kaistha and a man of some education, Sunkar took an interest in him and got him married

How his father came into Assam.

Meeting of his father with Sunkar.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

at Borduar to one Satyadi Ai. Madhav was the issue of this union. This was long before Sunkar left Upper Assam for Barpeta and before he became known.

Flight of Govind Giri from Borduar.

Up to the time of the incursions of the Kachari Mannas Govind Giri and Sunkar lived at the same place. But when Sunkar moved to Kumrakata, Govind Giri took shelter in a neighbouring forest-land bordering on the Brahmaputra. Chuhamung's policy with the Bhuyans was much the same as that adopted by Pharaoh, King of Egypt with respect to the children of Israel when they removed to the land of the Nile during the time of Joseph, although the motive of the Egyptian monarch was by far the more justifiable under the circumstances. When the country of Goshen was assigned to the Israelites for habitation on account of the abundance there of pasturage suitable for the thriving of their cattle, it might have been a secondary motive with Pharaoh that the occupation of the frontier tract by Joseph's brethren would keep out the depredations of the Nomadic races of Arabia who would frequently fall upon Egyptian cattle and carry off as much booty as they could get hold of. And this circumstance is well supported by the fact that Pharaoh even desired that a few from among the brethren of Joseph should be employed not only as royal herdsmen but protectors of cattle too. For he clearly says : " And if thou knowest any men of activity

Parallel, episode.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

among them, then make them rulers over my cattle." * If the Israelites were made to subserve to a purpose from political reasons, they were in their turn served to their advantage by being located in the best of quarters and in one that was in every way suitable for their occupation as shepherds, not to speak of the other blessings they received at the hands of the generous ruler of Egypt in being preserved from untimely death by starvation in their own country. It was fair therefore when a double object could be secured without any sacrifice to either party, that Pharoah would house the relations of his faithful minister in the city of Rameses, and thereby give an opportunity to Joseph to be able to discharge his obligation to Egypt that he had incurred on the account of his father's household. But how unlike was the unrighteous line of treatment of the Ahom prince? The parallel loses here all its bright colour. Not content with the persecutions he inflicted upon the Bhuyans at various times, Chuhamung ordered the people of Borduar to be brought to him and assigned a spot for their abode which, to say the least of it, was fit more for a battle-field than for a secure habitation. In their new abode, the new settlers had no peace, for they had to be ever on the alert to repulse the treacherous attacks of the wild Mannas and had little hope of ultimate success. Some say that the King adopted this plan with the view of repressing the

* Gen: xlvii: 6.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

growing power of the Bhuyans, or rather that of the people of Borduar who were an object of constant dread with the Ahom King. Chuhamung thought that if the spirited and enlightened people of Borduar were thus kept in a situation in which they were to be frequently exposed to the rude and wild ravages of the plundering Cachari Mannas, their opposition to the King would lose much of its strength. But this we can forgive in a barbarian prince.

Borduar under Chuhamung's order.

When the King's order was promulgated, the unfortunate people of Borduar fled to the woods and jungles for safety. Among the fugitives Ram Kana Atah was one. But the unfortunate man was seized by one Harshingvara an officer of the King. Luckily this officer was a man of humane disposition. Seeing in Ram Kana Atah much that he could like, Harsingvara did not produce his captive before the King but took him with himself to his own residence at Letupukharipar (Nowgong). Here a great familiarity and affection grew up between both and Ram Kana Atah came to be looked upon as a father by Harsingvara and all his household. It was during Ram Kana's stay at the place that the famous Madhav was born.

Captivity of Govind Giri.

Birth of Madhav.

Early years and education.

During his early years Madhav showed signs of great promise. He received his early instruction at the residence of Harsingvara and acquired

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

all the knowledge that could be learnt there.

Since the time of his birth he resided at Letupukharipar for twenty-two years. Govind Giri and his son then removed to a place called Ghagara where they lived for about twelve years. Subsequently they settled at a place called Bharal Dubi which was also named Bahara Kuchi. Shortly after Govind Giri desired that Madhav should marry. But as he was a stranger in Assam and a man of no very great means, he proposed to undertake a journey for the purpose to Bengal in order to visit again his family seat where his eldest son Damodar (reference to whom has been made in a previous page) was still living. The object of the journey was chiefly to procure funds from Damodar and other relatives wherewith to defray the expenses of Madhav's marriage. Madhav thus met his half brother at Banduka the ancestral seat where he acquired further learning in the *sastras*. Soon after however, Govind Giri died at Banduka, and Madhav started for Upper Assam where his mother had been left alone when he accompanied his father to Bengal. During his return journey he halted at a place called Jugighopa in Khutaghat within Bijni Raj in Goalpara. Here he received news

Change of residence.

Proposal of Madhav's marriage.

Journey to Bengal.

Death of his father and return to Upper Assam.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

News of Mother's illness.

of his mother's illness. Up to this time Madhav had not met Sunkar. Nor had he ever heard of his name or teachings. He had therefore

Early faith.

remained a Hindu by religion and had great faith in the whole host of gods and goddesses of the Hindu Pantheon. At the time he had hardly recovered from the effects of sorrow caused by his father's death when the despairing news of his mother's illness reached him. He was thus thrown into great distress of mind. In the anguish of his mind he made a vow to

Vow to goddess Durga.

Durga that should ever his mother recover, he would offer upon the altar of the goddess a black kid of no spot or blemish. The mother eventually recovered, and the sincere hearted Madhav full of joy, waited with eagerness for the approach of the yearly festival of the goddess when he wanted to fulfil his vow to the very letter. It should be mentioned here that Madhav had a brother-in-law (sister's husband) named Ramdas

His sister's husband.

Atah. When the day of the festival came, this Ramdas Atah was sent out to purchase a kid. On his way he came across Sunkar who after acquaintance enquired as to the errand on which the former was out on the *Puja* day. On being told that Ramdas was going to buy a goat which his brother-in-law Madhav meant to offer in sacrifice to the goddess Durga in fulfilment of a vow,

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Sunkar fell into argument with him. He convinced Ramdas of the errors and follies of the Pauranic religion and succeeded in shaking the brother-in-law's faith in idols so much that Ramdas was won over and embraced Sunkar's religion. He returned home late in the evening without the kid and found his wife's brother in a passion because of the delay. It did not take Ramdas long to explain what had happened, upon which Madhav resolved to form Sunkar's acquaintance and engage him in a religious controversy. The next day Madhav visited Sunkar. The debate was long and warm, and late in the day young Madhav was gained over to Sunkar's opinions. Being a lover of truth, when therefore once his belief in the Brahmanical religion was gone, he enlisted himself as one of Sunkar's devoted followers and so a union was formed which was never afterwards dissolved. The vow to Durga was not performed and the kid was not bought. All this took place before Sunkar and Madhav left for Barpeta.

Meeting with Sunkar.

Renounces Hindu religion.

Vow not performed.

The circumstances that led to the migration of Sunkar and Madhav to Lower Assam have been narrated elsewhere. On their way to Barpeta, Madhav halted at Baradi a village about a mile east of Barpeta where a Shastra exists at the present day to commemorate his memory. When Sunkar moved to Patbaushi, Madhav settled at Ganak

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Kuchi, a road-side village on the way to Patbaushi. There he resided for eighteen years and it was at this place that Sunkar delegated his ecclesiastical authority to Madhav before leaving for the last time for Kuch Behar. After the death of Sunkar, Madhav removed to the village of Sundardiya two miles north of Barpeta where there is a big Shastra. He lived here for fourteen years. Shortly before his death he lived for about six months at Gomura Shastra in Barpeta Sub-Division, and returned to Barpeta and installed one Mathura Das Atah on the Shastra *guddi*. Madhav like Sunkar several times visited Kuch Behar and had discussions with the State *pundits* of that kingdom. He died at Bhela in Bengal.

Succeeds Sunkar.

Appoints a successor.

Death.

Madhav led a life of celibacy and hence did not live together with Sunkar. He was cleverer than Sunkar, shrewd and subtle in his arguments. From a social point of view it may be said he showed tact in relaxing the strictness about eating and drinking in order to suit the disposition of the people he had to deal with. For example, it was he who first granted the dispensation that it was lawful for the inhabitants of Barpeta as well as for the Mahapurusiyas generally to eat meat, and it was he who supported this idea with the authority of the Hindu *Sastras*. Sunkar was against flesh-eating himself

Character.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

and he therefore desired to enforce the habit upon his followers. But the people of Barpeta among whom there were many Charals, Doms, and other low castes, did not much relish this injunction that was laid upon them by their leader and signs of universal dissatisfaction became patent. Madhav at once saw the danger and rightly apprehending that a strict enforcement of obedience to the practice might result in a split and thus eventually give a fatal blow to the new religion of Sunkar, advised his master to yield the point and allow some relaxation of the observance. Sunkar adopted the proposal. Accordingly the Mahapurusiya people now eat the flesh of game animals such as the deer. They do not however eat the flesh of domesticated animals.

For such reasons and from the fact of his living like an anchorite as far as the enjoyment of life was concerned Madhav was a greater favourite with the people than Sunkar himself. This is evident from the fact that he is styled the Mahapurusha (great being) and that the followers of the religion are called after this name. Sunkar however is regarded as an *Avatar* like Madhav and like the latter has an annual festival in his honor, though the festival of Madhav is celebrated with more pomp.*

* Madhav's *Kirtan* lasts for ten days, Sunkar's for seven, and Mathur Das Atah's for five days.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Madhav completed what Sunkar had left incomplete and undone and was the founder of numerous Shastras. The story goes that Sunkar once observed that had he met Madhav a few years earlier he would, like him, have lived a celibate.

This expression of opinion on the part of Sunkar is regarded by the Mahapurusiya people as a circumstance amounting to an acknowledgment by the founder of the Mahapurusiya sect of the superiority of his admirer and follower. After Sunkar's death Madhav who was characterised as an individual keeping above all that was selfish, provided for the support of the family left by his deceased spiritual guide.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

DAMODAR.

A legend is connected with the birth of this man by which divine origin is ascribed to him. Certain it is that he was a Brahmin by birth. He was born at Nalacha in Nowgong east of Borduar, although the Mahapurusiya people say he was an inhabitant of Patbaushi. The latter account however cannot be accepted though it is true that at a later period of his life he came to live at Patbaushi. This probably accounts for the story that he was born there.

Birth.

His father was Sadananda. Damodar was Sunkar's follower, although the Damodaria people will not admit this, and are furthermore disposed to look upon their leader as an independent *avatar*. It may be observed here that the Mahapurusiya and the Damodaria people are somewhat antagonistic in their creeds, although the latter would fain acknowledge the religious supremacy of Sunkar and Madhav. But they are more or less reticent on the point. Both creeds are essentially the same with little difference in matters of rites and observances. The religious books of the Damodarias are exactly what was compiled by Sunkar and Madhav, and this circumstance is laid stress upon by the Mahapurusiya people as being conclusive proof of the fact that the Damodarias are in reality merely

Mahapurusiyas and Damodarias.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Sunkar's followers. It has been already related how Damodar and Sunkar had an interview with Chaitanya. At that period Damodar certainly had not set himself up as an independent religious leader but professed Sunkar's religion. Sunkar however treated Damodar with respect. This probably because he was a Brahmin. Damodar was educated by Kalapi Bhattacharyya.

There can be no doubt that he became an adherent of Sunkar while in Upper Assam, since shortly after Sunkar had left the country Damodar followed him to Patbaushi where there exists a Shastra of Damodar's. A dilapidated brick temple too exists at the place inside which it is stated there is a slab of stone said to bear his foot-marks. This stone which is called the *Pada Shila* (stone of foot-prints) is regarded by the adherents of this creed with great veneration. On his way towards Barpeta side, Damodar stopped at Hajo Temple for the purpose of seeing there the image of Hayagriv.

Removes to Patbaushi.

At Barpeta all were for a time under the common leadership of Sunkar but it is probable that a breach took place soon, nay, too soon after the death of Sunkar and as soon Madhav assumed the position of religious head. The circumstances are said to have been as follows.

Separation from the Mahapurusiyas.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Madhav sent an invitation from Barpeta to Damodar at Patbaushi requesting him to come and take part in the celebration of Sunkar's *sradh*. As Sunkar was a Sudra, and Damodar a Brahmin, Damodar's mother Shushila persuaded her son not to go himself to Barpeta, but send instead a boat-load of provisions and other things that were suitable for the occasion.

Now Madhav was known to be un-compromising in his opposition to all forms of caste prejudice. The teaching of Sunkar's religion also levelled the axe against caste. Madhav therefore resented Damodar's conduct. The gifts sent were refused and Damodar was cut off from the pale of the Mahapurusiya fraternity by Sunkar's spirited successor. It is said that Madhav Dev exclaimed "As far removed is heaven from hell, so far will Damodar be from me." From this time forth the followers of the new creed split into two sects, one adhering to Madhav, and the other to Damodar. It should be mentioned here that while Damodar was at Patbaushi, he sheltered all those Bhakats who were either expelled or excommunicated from the Barpeta Shastra, with the intention of evidently forming a Shastra with them. This too was naturally a source of annoyance to Madhav.

His belief.

Damodar was not wholly a follower of Sunkar in all sincerity. While outwardly he subscribed to the tenets of the Mahapurusiya religion, there

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

is much suspicion that he still retained the *Pauranic* superstitions in his heart. These manifested themselves in some of his outward acts. For example, he was in the habit of telling beads as orthodox Hindus do. He made distinction between a Brahmin and a Sudra. His creed whatever it be is tinged with the hue of *Pauranic* practice and observances and his followers are seen joining in the worship of the goddess Durga. It is sin with a Mahapurusiya to cast even a look at idols, but a Damodaria may approach an idol though he would not openly mix with the Bengal Hindus on the occasion of the festival of the ten-armed goddess.

Damodar attained the ripe age of ninety-two before he died. Patbaushi was his favourite seat He used to call it his *Nija dham.* (own seat)

Patbaushi in Barpeta.

Patbaushi is likened as it were to the heart of the lotus while all the other Damodaria Shastras to petals surrounding this charming centre. Bhatta Dev was Damodar's chief disciple and became his successor at Patbaushi. His descendants are the present Adhikars of the Damodaria Patbaushi Shastra.

Damodar left a nephew who did not however share his uncle's authority but founded an independent Shastra at Pahamura (South Kamrup).

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Character Summary.

Damodar was much inferior to both Sunkar and Madhav in the matter of religious activity and also in education. Nor did he possess a bright intellect. He was not a strict observer of rites like Sunkar, nor an uncompromising leader like Madhav. Indeed a good portion of his religious system was none other than that of Sunkar and he only added to, and subtracted from, it just after his separation from Madhav with a view to suit the feelings of his adherents.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

HARI DEV.

He was the leader of a small sect. He comes next to Damodar when numerical strength of followers is considered.

Birth.

His father was Ajanath and his mother Parijati. He was born at Narayanpur in Shasemar (Lakhimpur) about 400 years ago. Sunkar and Damodar were his contemporaries and with them he went to see Chaitanya in Bengal.

Contemporaries.

There is a text recited by the followers of this sect which they believe contains a prophecy about the contemporaneous appearance of Chaitanya, Sunkar, Damodar and Hari Dev.

It runs thus :—

শঙ্করঃ শঙ্করঃ প্রোক্তঃ কৃষ্ণদামোদর স্তথা।
হরিদেবো হরিশ্চৈব চৈতন্যঃ পূর্ণব্রহ্মচ।*

(Translation) :—It was said from a long time that Sunkar was none other than Siva, that Damodar was Krishna ; Hari Dev was the veritable Hari and Chaitanya was Brahma himself in his complete entity.

Hari Dev was but little known. He founded several Shastras which will be noticed elsewhere. It is said that in the beginning Sunkar, Hari Dev and Damodar together founded the Shastra of Manari, and that after Hari Dev had

*But there is no reason to believe that this verse occurs in any of the Hindu *Sastras* of authority and is thought by many as quite spurious.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

been installed on the *guddi* of it by Sunkar, the three separated. The word "Maniri" means "মান করিলোঁ" (paid respect) and the Shastra was named as such because Sunkar entertained respect for Hari Dev and located him there.

Manari Shastra.

Hari Dev removed from Upper Assam for almost the same reason as that which compelled Sunkar to leave. The soldiers of the king were of the Mesh tribe. They were filthy in their habits and heeded not the ceremonies of purification, etc. Now this was so repugnant to Hari Dev's feelings that he found it impossible to live there longer, as otherwise he would have come into constant conflict with the king's men touching such matters. He thus anticipated trouble and decided upon the step of quitting the place. His chief Shastra in Kamrup is at village Bahari in the Sub-Division of Barpeta. The present Adhikars of this Shastra are the descendants of Jagannath, chief disciple and son-in-law of Hari Dev.

Removal from Upper Assam.

The belief of the followers of this leader is nearly the same as that of the Damodarias. It is said Damodar and Hari Dev had great sympathy for each other during their life-time and that both wished to make Adhikars of Brahmins to take charge of the respective Shastras founded by them. Sunkar's scripture is the scripture of this sect. Hari Dev used to visit Barpeta frequently in the days of Sunkar and Madhav.

Creed.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

GOPAL DEV.

A minor notice of this man will suffice. Originally he was one of the nine Atahs (preachers or missionaries appointed chiefly by Madhav Dev) to be noticed hereafter, but separated from the ranks of the Mahapurusiyas owing to similar causes which led to the expulsion of Damodar Dev. His jurisdiction was in Bhowanipur in Barpeta Sub-Division. The story goes that once during his Shastriya tour Madhav was returning from Bhowanipur to Barpeta by boat. Gopal was in his company with several others. While they were yet in the way, the weather grew very rough and a heavy storm was expected. Gopal anxious on the account of Madhav Dev who at that period came to be styled the "Maha Purusha" (the great being) addressed himself suddenly in an evil moment to the clouds that were passing over-head and said "Have little forbearance, for I am taking the Maha Purusha to his place." Whatever he might mean by these words, they were construed by Madhav to be an invocation to Varuna the god of rain in the Hindu pantheon.*

Who he was formerly

Separation from Madhav's party.

Accordingly he taxed Gopal and accused him of being an idolater at heart and ordered him to be thrown into the

* Holding more or less the same position in the Hindu pantheon as Neptune the god of sea of the Greeks.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

water. The order was faithfully carried out and the boat went on in its journey. After going little distance, Madhav directed Sriram (another Atah who was in the boat) to look out and enquire if Gopal was still alive. Whereupon Sriram shouted out to Gopal and said "Ho Gopal! are you dead or alive?" To this question Gopal who then lay swinging or clinging to a boat oar and was struggling in the water, gave reply in these words viz: "Why will Gopal perish? I Gopal am living yet. Tell Maha Purusha that from this day if the Maha Purusha rows his boat by the strength of the flat (blade) of the oar, I Gopal will row mine by the pole (handle.") This was a significant hint and he meant clearly that henceforth the two were to move in two hostile paths or opposite directions and the after-career of Gopal verified this.

His Shastras.

Gopal Dev founded the Shastras of Parabhara and Kaljar in Bhowanipur Mouza in Sub-Division Barpeta. The twelve Saru Barajanias were founded by twelve of his disciples. Six of them were under Brahmins and six under Kaisthas. Gopal was a Sudra by caste. The Damodaria sect which was fast rising into importance inculcated idas of Brahminism into the minds of his followers and soon after his death the Brahmin Bhakats of his Shastras threw off their allegiance to their departed leader and transferred it to Damodar. The above twelve Shastras are therefore more or

Schism.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

ess Damodaria now, although in Gopal's time the creed taught in such institutions was essentially a Mahapurusiya one. But this is not the case with the Bhowanipur and Kaljar Shastras at which places Sunkar and Madhav are held in great honour and the Mahapurusiya beliefs subscribed to on every point.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

PART I.

SECTION II.

Summary of creeds of the different sects.

——:o:——

All the various sects described in the previous pages are more or less followers of Vaisnavism with a theistic tendency and all draw from the same stock, *viz.* the *Srimat Bhagvat* of Veda Vyasa. The *Sastras* are compilations from this book with additions and alterations made by the spiritual leaders.

Sects into which the Assamese people are divided.

The religious sects among the Assamese people may be divided into four main divisions.

I. The Mahapurusiyas or the followers of Sunkar and Madhav and of their successors and descendants. II. The Damodarias or the followers of Damodar. III. The followers of Hari Dev. IV. The followers of Gopal Dev.

I.—THE MAHAPURUSIYAS.

Position held by Sunkar and Madhav in the belief of the Mahapurusiya people.

The Mahapurusiyas regard Sunkar and Madhav as *avatars* or incarnations of Krishna, although as has been observed elsewhere that neither Sunkar nor Madhav ever claimed the dignity of a god. They were only zealous preachers of Vaisnavism and in some respects good reformers. Sal-

Idea of salvation.

vation according to this creed is to be ob-

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

tained by good deeds failing which, the taking of the name of God would be the next method to secure it. *Sankirtan* [recitation of the name of God accompanied with music, such as *khols* (sort of drums) and *kartals* (cymbals)] forms a factor in worship and *mantras* must be obtained from *Gurus*.

The ten Avatars of the Hindus.

The ten incarnations (Dosh Avatara) of Vishnu are believed in. Caste prejudice ought not to find favor with the votaries of this creed as it is in opposition to the teachings of Sunkar and Madhav. Madhav wished to do away with it not all at once, but by degrees, and as a matter of fact it has never been altogether done away with. On the contrary it has revived to the fullest extent among the Mahapurusiyas of the present day. They however do not attach so great an importance to it as the Damodarias do. There is one class of Bhakats who do not recognise caste at all. These are called the Kaulia Bhakats—monks or recluses who generally live in barracks within the precincts of the Shastra house. They are of course celibates and supposed to be entirely dead to the concerns of the world. When they go out they use a sort of staff with a certain badge on top which goes for a distinctive mark for a Kaulia. Their chief occupation consists in reading the religious books and expounding them

Caste system.

Kaulia monks.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

to visitors of the Shastra house. The Mahapurusiyas do not worship the thirty-three millions of gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and celebrate no *Pujas*. In this respect they stand superior to the Hindus of Bengal who are both idolatrous and superstitious.

Mahapurusiyas are not idolaters.

They eat the flesh of game animals or animals which are not usually got domesticated, such as deer, wild ducks, etc, but not that of any animal which is commonly tamed in the house, such as the sheep or goat. When slaughtering an animal, they do not cut its throat with the knife, or sever the head from the trunk with a scimitar like what the Hindus do but cudgel it to death. This is a peculiar custom and looks rather barbarous. The Mahapurusiyas are opposed to vaccination.

Clean and unclean animals for food.

In some respects they are cleanly in habits and bathe as often in order to remove the stain of supposed contaminations. Many of them shave their heads in the Uriya fashion and some preserve the tonsure. A few again mark or paint their foreheads and faces with the *tilak* (stain of yellow ochre or sandal wood paste generally observed on the bodies of Vaisnavs.)

Habits, ablutions &c.

At every Mahapurusiya Shastra there is kept an image of Krishna. The more refined say that this is merely to attract the vulgar masses whos

Image of Krishna.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

cannot form an abstract conception of the Deity. Beyond this fact idolatry does not obtain among the Mahapurusiyas. The Kaulia monks are quite indifferent to these images and do not approach them with veneration.

Religious books.

The chief *Sastras* are the *Kirtan* and *Dasam* of Sunkar Dev and the *Namghosha* and *Ratnavali* of Madhav. The *Kirtan* and *Namghosha* are gleanings from the different Hindu *Sastras*, while the *Dasam* or *Dasam Skandha* and the *Ratnavali* are compilations from the *Bhagavat*. There exist a few other minor religious books. The Mahapurusiyas will not eat with the Damodarias, but inter-marriage obtains.

II.—THE DAMODARIAS.

What they profess.

The Damodarias believe in the idol Krishna and regard Damodar as his incarnation. They do not accept the spiritual leadership of Sudras and hence pay no religious homage to Sunkar and Madhav. They also have *Sankirtans* and take the name of God for salvation. Save what has been noted above there seems to be no other difference on the way between them and the Mahapurusiyas, or in fact, any of the other sects on material points of faith and teaching, each sect regarding its founder as an *avatar* from the God-head which is more or less a synonym for Krishna.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Similarly the differences of the Damodarias with the Mahapurusiyas in matters of rites and forms are of a trifling character, but the chief point worthy of note is this, *viz.*, while a Mahapurusiya will not do so much as even cast a look at a Hindu idol, (so goes the report at least) a Damodaria on the other hand will not scruple to enter a *Puja-house* and take part in the worship.

Chief distinction between a Damodaria and a Mahapurusiya.

The Damodarias observe caste rigidly and must have Brahmins for their *Gurus*. All of the Damodaria Shastras were as a rule under the control of Brahmin Adhikars with the exception of Barkapla, Nowshastra and Shingra Shastras in Mouzah Sarukheshetri in Barpeta. These Shastras are said to be under Sudra Adhikars. In matters of food, eating, etc., the Damodarias are not very particular. They will eat the flesh of goats, pigeons, ducks, etc. They allow vaccination and do not pay much heed to ablutions or the ceremonies of purification, not to the same extent at least, as the Mahapurusiyas do. A Damodaria has no objection to eating in the house of a Mahapurusiya. Briefly, the differences among these two sects are more of a social character than anything else.

Damodarias observe caste.

Differences in food, eating, etc.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

III.—FOLLOWERS OF HARI DEV.

Their belief.

The adherents of Hari Dev regard their leader as an emanation of Krishna, but do not altogether reject the *avatarism* (incarnation) of Sunkar. They observe, though not very strictly, the rites and ceremonies of purification and accept the *Bhakat-Sheva* which means an indiscriminate acceptance by the priests of everything that is set before them by their *Jajmans* (votaries.) Rigid orthodoxy will not however permit this latter mentioned practice, and hence the circumstance lowers the priests of this school in the estimation of the Mahapurusiyas who profess not to countenance it. Hari Dev had a great respect for Sunkar and Madhav, and visited the Barpeta Shastra on several occasions when both of them were alive. But the present tendencies of this sect seem to be towards the opinions of the Damodarias.

IV.—FOLLOWERS OF GOPAL DEV.

Their belief.

They are very closely allied to the Mahapurusiyas and subscribe to almost all the tenets laid down by Sunkar and Madhav, the only point worthy of note being that they hold an annual festival in honour of Gopal. It is believed that although Gopal Dev had been estranged from Madhav, the Mahapurusiya leader cherished an affection

Sympathy of Madhav Dev.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

for him still and would often make enquiries in the kindest of terms regarding him. Like the Hari Devi party the members of this sect too accept the *Bhakat-Sheva*, and it may be added here that the Damodarias do the same as well.

Gopal Devi celibates.

The monks of the Gopal Devi fraternity wear long wigs. Of course it is superfluous to record that the religion of *Bhagvat* is the creed that is professed by this party.

Splits.

After Gopal's death there was a schism among his adherents, and a number went over to Damodar's side. Some say that the four Shastras of Aunihati, Dakshinpat, Kuruabahi and Goremar were founded respectively by four out of the twelve Jadumanis who were the founders of the twelve Saru Barajanias.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

45509

PART II.

Atahs, Successors and Followers of Sunkar, Madhav, Damodar, and Hari Dev.

OF SUNKAR.

—:o:—

Sunkar left behind him two sons Ramananda and Hari Charan, none of whom however stood very high in their father's estimation.* Sunkar could very well foresee that a stronger arm than even his was needed to retain all that he had acquired. Being an individual who would not in any way yield to considerations of self-interest it never became his ambition to make the priestly office hereditary in his family when a worthier man than his sons was at hand, however unconnected he might be with the family though. Accordingly he appointed Madhav his successor and instructed his own sons to obey the new chief in all matters. As regards granting them any ecclesiastical charge they were told to remain content with what Madhav would be pleased to commit to their hands. Thus both Ramananda and Hari Charan witnessed Madhav Dev declared as their father's successor at Ganak Kuchi in Barpeta.

Madhav appointed Sunkar's successor in preference to sons.

Ramananda

Was present at the death-bed of his father. When the end approached, the sorrowful son with tears in his eyes

* See Sunkar's exclamation on his death-bed *infra*.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

enquired what sort of gift the departing father was going to leave to him. Sunkar referred Ramananda to Madhav, adding however that Ramananda's mother had in her possession a large quantity of gold which the death-bed supplicant was to divide between himself and his brother Hari Charan. The answer however did not satisfy the son who was, in making the petition, actuated by far different motives. Indeed Ramananda had no temporal end in view. He aspired after spiritual improvement. He therefore begged for something higher and nobler. This display of mind greatly pleased the dying father who exclaimed and said "Ramananda ! Hitherto I thought you to be my *Malputra* (worthless son) but now I perceive that I have a *Virya-putra* (a prototype of his father) in you."

His petition at Sunkar's death-bed.

Sunkar's joy.

Ramananda founded no particular Shastra but lived mostly in the company of Madhav himself. He died at Patbaushi the religious seat of his father.

Hari Charan

Was the second son of Sunkar. He too founded no Shastra and like hi brother Ramananda lived under the protection of Madhav. He also died at Patbaushi. It is commonly said that great men are succeeded by weak sons. This saying was verified too truly in the lives of Ramananda and i arHsCharan.

Observation.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Purusattam

Was the son of Ramananda and grandson of Sunkar. He had the authority of a few Shastras. These will be specified in Part III. After Madhav Dev had established himself at Sundaridiya, Purusattam removed with his grandmother Sunkar's widow to live there too. Twelve families of Bhakats were assigned to Sunkar's widow for her maintenance. To this day there is to be seen a small house on the outskirts of the village, which marks, it is said, the site where this venerable old dame once dwelt. There is also an Ai* Goswaini Shastra close by with an Adhikar over it. Purusattam had a daughter named Kesavpriya whose descendants are the present Adhikars of Chamaguri and Digholi Shastras respectively. Purusattam died at Chamaguri in Sibsagar.

Sunkar's widow.

Place of abode of Sunkar's widow. Her Shastra.

Chaturbhuj.

The story goes that Chaturbhuj was affected with leprosy. He was the son of Hari Charan and grandson of Sunkar. He undertook a pilgrimage to Orissa and saw the Temple of Jagannath. On his way back he came through Kuch Behar and made his stay for some time at a place called Bheladwar.

Pilgrimage to Orissa.

---

* Sunkar's wife is so styled by the Mahapurusiyas.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

While here seven families of Bhakats made him their Adhikar. But he did not like the place and so shifted to Madhupur where there was already an Adhikar. The latter apprehending a secession among his Bhakats in consequence of the presence among them of a descendant of the great Sunkar, persuaded Chaturbhuj to remove to Vishnupur (Bannagar in Barpeta) where he subsequently founded a Shastra and installed his son-in-law on the *guddi*. Chaturbhuj died at Vishnupur.

Is made Adhikar at a place in Kuch Behar.

Removes to Vishnupur in Barpeta and founds a Shastra there.

Damodar (not to be confounded with the leader of the Damodaria sect.)

Hari Charan had also a daughter named Govindapuriya who was married to Gabharu Khan Giri. Damodar Takur was the issue of this union. Govindapuriya not being on good terms with her son, left for Upper Assam in order to live under the protection of Badla Atah. Damodar followed her there and met her at Majuli in Sibsagar. Here a reconciliation took place between mother and son. During his stay at the place, Damodar founded the Majuli Shastra. Subsequently he returned to the deserted old Shastra of Borduar the site of which was pointed out to him by an aged fisherman. He re-established it and gave the

Founding of Majuli Shastra in Sibsagar.

Re-building of Borduar Shastra.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

place a revival. Damodar Takur also occupied Narwa Shastra in Nowgong.

——:o:——

Of Madhav.

Atahs.

These were at first chiefly preachers or proselytizers who later on were entrusted with the care of the various Shastras founded by Sunkar and Madhav. With the exception of Bhavanan Atah almost all of them were appointed by Madhav Dev. They were picked from among the personal friends and companions of both Sunkar and Madhav Dev. Common people suppose that they were miraculously sprung from Sunkar and Madhav and regard them as emanations of the mysterious Sunkar-Madhav body. But this, it need hardly be said, is only a superstitious belief and the more sensible and refined do not endorse it. Briefly, the Atahs were none but human beings, and merely composed a body of men to whom the authority and management of the new Shastras were delegated because of their good character and ability. They were selected to certain extent judiciously by Madhav with a view to govern the religious institutions of the Mahapurusiya sect as the number of these was increasing daily.

Who they were.

Popular notions about them.

The Atahs were nine in number. The Shastras committed to their respective charge are all enumerated in Part III and so need not be repeated here.

The Atahs were nine in number.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

The names of the Atahs are given below:—(1) Bhavanan popularly known as Thakur Atah. He was, properly speaking, Sunkar Dev's Atah and hence called the Thakur Atah or the Atah of the Thakur* i.e. of Sunkar himself. Sunkar placed him under a religious bond with Madhav in the pseudo-relationship or affinity of a Shakhi or bosom friend. A Shakhi among the Mahapurusiyas means an intimate friend standing more or less in the position of a brother. The ceremony that creates this sort of brotherhood or league is briefly this. Two or more persons who decide to enter upon an alliance of the Shakhi-ship have to kneel down together or perform some process of genuflection before the *Guru* (spiritual guide) who thereupon pronounces upon them the same *mantra*. Henceforth there comes to be formed betwixt the individuals a union or bond of fellowship which cannot, it is supposed, be dissolved by death even. Casuistry is powerless here. The Shakhis are expected to help each other to a man. This even at the risk of life and property and no other kind of obligation, however strong it may be, can be allowed to stand between one Shakhi and the interests of a fellow-Shakhi; and thus to this day even the Assam Courts daily witness scenes (usually enacted by a recusant witness of

His intimacy with Madhav as a Shakhi.

Shakhis.

* A religious title of veneration chiefly applied to Brahmins. Its primary meaning is Deity, idol, god. The term is also applied by Hindus to father out of a sacred regard for him.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

the Shakhi school when it becomes his misfortune to be placed under a searching and searing cross-examination !) which prove more or less the truth of this saying. No doubt the institution was originally designed as a cement of friendship under a religious sanction.

(2) Sriram Atah. Resided at Barpeta and generally with Madhav.

(3) Harihar Atah. Was sent away to Kuch Behar.

(4) Gopal Atah of Bhowanipur. (Seceded afterwards.)

(5) Keshav Atah. Upper Assam.

(6) Bar Vishnu Atah of Chamoria.

(7) Behar Vishnu Atah.

(8) Padma Atah *alias* Badla Atah.

(9) Mathura Das Atah. Was the chief of all Atahs. He was appointed by Madhav ostensibly to be the Adhikar of Barpeta Shastra, but to be forsooth his successor and still more to become virtually a leader of the Mahapurusiya sect after his demise. The Mahapurusiyas set apart a season of festival in honour of this man as they do in honour of Sankur and Madhav. Mathura Das' festival is known as the Atah Kirtan festival and held some time in autumn. Mathura Das was not an active ruler, but all intricate questions connected with daily life, religious practices, manners, rites, ceremonies and observances, on which the *Sastras* of Sun-

Mathura Das the greatest of all the Atahs.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

kar and Madhav were silent, used to be referred to him by all other Shastras, and his opinion on such subjects was final and authoritative. Nay, what more, the same had the force of an ecclesiastical mandate. In fact, during his time Barpeta was the Navadwipa (Nuddea) of Assam.

An anecdote about him is told which illustrates the extreme simplicity of his manners and his humility. He was a gifted man, and possessed much erudition in different sorts of religious literature. His fame therefore attracted people from all quarters to Barpeta. Among others, the then king of Kuch Behar once came to pay him a visit. When the king approached the Shastra Temple, Mathura Das Atah was engaged in sweeping the porch of it as it was the morning hour then. The prince came up to him and taking him to be the Temple-sweeper enquired where Mathura Das Atah was and when he could be seen. Perceiving who the distinguished visitor was, Mathura Das did not then reveal his real position, but merely named a certain hour which was described as the time when the Atah usually received his pilgrims and visitors. The Shastra chief then performed his customary ablutions, put on his sacerdotal garb, and when the appointed hour came, sent word to the king to say that he was prepared to receive his royal majesty. The king was duly ushered into the pre-

Visit of the king of Kuch Behar to Barpeta.

The King finds Mathura Das sweeping the temple.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

The Prince's confusion.

sence of the Adhikar when, behold to his great astonishment and utmost confusion, the royal visitor saw in the person of the Adhikar the sweeper of the morning. He hesitated for some moments to ask the question that lay uppermost in his breast, but after a while made bold to broach the impatient enquiry

A question. Mathura Atah's frank answer.

viz., whether the head of the Shastra was not sweeping the temple-floor in the morning. To this question Mathura Dass gave reply in the affirmative. Bir Narayan (for this was the prince's name) wanted to know why it was so. Thereupon Mathura Das informed the king that there were no sweepers tn the place, adding however that he could not for this reason allow the house of his god to be neglected. The king promised so supply the want, and on return to his kingdom sent from Kuch Behar twelve families of Haris (sweeper caste) to Barpeta. This was how Barpeta got its Hari caste. Formerly there was no such caste there.

Arrival of sweepers from Kuch Behar.

On the occasion of the visit alluded to above the Kuch Behar prince intimated it to be his wish to be enlisted as a *jajman* (*mantra*-seeker) of the chief Atah. Mathura Das however referred him for the purpose to Badla Atah of

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

The king of Kuch Behar becomes a *jajman* of Mathura Das Atah.

Upper Assam. When the king went there he was told that Mathura Das was the head of all and that the ruler of Kuch Behar must seek for *mantra* at no other hands. Accordingly the King came back and took *mantra* from Mathura Atah. After this event he returned to his kingdom.

Question of the appointment of Adhikar for Barpeta Shastras.

Mathura Das Atah appointed no one to be his successor and made it the rule that the question of the appointment of an Adhikar should rest entirely with the *Samuha Bhakats* (Bhakat public). Furthermore, in the event of such an appointment being decided upon by the collective body of *Bhakats*, the same was to take place by means of a general election. After Mathura's death when the question arose as to who should be the next Adhikar, one Govardhan was elected by the *Samuha* (public). But this man resigned the office after six months and thus the difficulty about the appointment of a successor presented itself anew.

Govardhan elected as Adhikar.

His resignation.

Matters remained in an unsettled state. People were divided and factions and splits began to be rife when luckily Purusattam son of Ramananda arrived at Barpeta. He felt the pulse of the public and discovered erelong that the majority were in favour of the appointment of a Brahmin Adhikar.

Factions. Timely arrival of Purusattam grand-son of Sunkar.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Accordingly Purusattam suggested the election of Gopal Misra of Patbaushi who was a descendant of Ram Ram Guru Sunkar's family priest. The proposal was unanimously accepted and Gopal Misra became indeed the first Adhikar of Barpeta. His descendants continue up to the present day. The office has now become practically hereditary in the family though it is declared that the Barpeta Adhikar may be removed from his office by the united voice of all the Bhakats. No such instance has however taken place as yet and it is surmised that the assertion is at its best a myth or rodomontade only.

Gopal Misra the first Adhikar of Barpeta.

Among the Atahs who obtained a distinction and who exercised more or less a general authority over the rest were these *viz*: 1st Mathura Das Atah of Barpeta. 2nd Badla Atah of Upper Assam and 3rd Behar Vishnu Atah of Kuch Behar. But Mathura Das ranked as the greatest of all.

Distinguished Atahs.

—:o:—

Of Damodar.

Bhatta Dev—Was the chief adherent of Damodar and was given the Patbaushi Shastra. The present Adhikar of the Patbaushi Damodaria Shastra is a descendant of this man. Damodar Dev appointed four *Acharyyas* (resident ministers). *Acharyya* is a Bengali word meaning minister. From a pure Hindu point of view the word can only be

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

applied to a Brahmin having of course the qualification of a minister or scribe. Damodar's use of this term in the Shastra nomenclature in preference to the term "Atah" used by both Sunkar and Madhav, nay, rather his partiality for it shows how the head of the Damodaria sect was not altogether able to forget Brahminism even when he was seemingly preaching Vaisnavism. The *Acharyyas* thus appointed were sent abroad in the four geographical directions as under :—

Acharyyas or ministers of Damodar.

(1) In the east—Banshi Gopal was appointed Adhikar of Aunihati, but he did not live to complete the arrangements of the Shastra institution. This work was completed by Gobind.

(2) In the west—Baladev was appointed Adhikar of Bamodevpur and Baikuntapur (Kuch Behar). The present Adhikar of these Shastras is his descendant.

(3) In the north—Bhagwan Dev was appointed to Govindpur and Karsanna Shastras in Bajali, North Kamrup. The present Adhikar of these places is his descendant.

(4) In the south—Santa Dev was appointed Adhikar of Garimari near Chamaria in South Kamrup. Damodar had a nephew named Sri Krishna who founded the Pahumura Shastra (South Kamrup). His posterity may be found within the estate of the Bijni Raj in Goalpara.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Of Hari Dev.

Hari Dev had four chief disciples. They were Jagannath, Hari Charan Dev, Narayan Dev and Adhar Jadumani.

Successors of Hari Dev.

The present Adhikar of Bahari (Mouzah Chenga in Barpeta Sub Division) takes his descent from Jagannath. Hari Charan Dev's descendant is the present Adhikar of Jagra Shastra. The Adhikar of Mahara is Adhar Jadumani's descendant, while Narayan Dev's descendant is the present Adhikar of Haripur. Jagannath was the son-in-law* of Hari Dev. The Adhikars of Manari Shastra are the descendants of another son-in-law.

—:o:—

Of Gopal Dev.

Gopal had no successor of much note.

—:o:—

PART III.

Showing the Shastras of Assam with the Names of their Founders.

Preliminary Remarks.

It should be noted here that in the Table below the names of the Shastras have been arranged under the names of the religious leaders respectively who are popularly believed to be the founders of them. But from this circumstance it must

* Adopted son according to one account which however does not obtain much currency among people supposed to possess knowledge on the point.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

not be understood that they were thus in all instances so founded by those leaders. In many cases it was the resident Bhakats who erected such places long after the death of the leaders to whom subsequently those religious institutions were attributed. This was apparently done partly out of a desire on the part of the Bhakats and other worshippers residing in such places to commemorate the memory of the leaders, and partly because of the fact that the leaders in some instances again dwelt at one time or other at those spots. In all other cases not coming within the scope of the above remarks the institutions were founded under the direct authority of the leaders under whose names they appear in the list.

To put the matter more clearly, the group under the name of each leader represents the Shastras which embrace his teachings and religious opinions. In a few instances however, some of the Shastras have been repeated in more than one group for reasons which are evident from the arrangement itself. The Table should therefore be read with the reservation contained in the fore-going remarks.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

1 Sunkar.

1. Butadwar *alias* Borduar.
2. Alipukhuri.
3. Kumrakata.
4. Beloguri.
5. Dhonga (Jorhat).
6. Kaimar.
7. Narwa. All these in Upper Assam.

In Barpeta—

8. Káplábari (in Sarukheshetri).
9. Kumar Kuchi (Little N. of Patbaushi).
10. Nij Patbaushi.

In Kuch Behar—

11. Phulbari.
12. Kakatkuta.

1A. *Shastras of Sunkar's descendants.*

(a) Chaturbhuj (Sunkar's grandson by Hari Charan) was assigned the two Shastras of

1. Bar Gamura (Sarukheshetri) and
2. Karakuchi (Sarukheshetri) by Madhav Dev. He had himself founded the Bar.
3. Barajania Shastras in Upper Assam.
4. Ghilajari.
5. Vishnupur (In Barnagar quarters in Barpeta).

(b) Purusattam (Grandson of Sunkar by Ramananda) possessed the two Shastras of

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

1. Kaimar and

2. Chamaguri (Nowgong) of his grandfather's besides the four Shastras assigned to him by Madhav Dev. These latter have been shewn in Madhav's list.

(c) Chakrapani grandson of Purusattam founded Samaguri; and another grandson Sarangapani founded Digholi Shastra.

(d) Damodar grandson of Hari Charan possessed the Shastra of Narawa (Nowgong). Re-occupied Borduar and founded Majuli Shastra in Sibsagar. The site of the latter Shastra is reported to have been encroached upon by the Brahmaputra.

2 Madhav.

1. Barpeta.
2. Ganakkuchi.
3. Baradi (Where he lived for six months).
4. Sundaridiya (14 years).
5. Bar Haranda (S. Kamrup).
6. Phulaguri (do).
7. Shikarhati (do).
8. Gomura (Sarukheshetri Mouzah in Barpeta Sub-Division).

In Kuch Behar—

9. Ramrakuti.
10. Bheladwar.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

11. Serampore.
12. Balbujabura (6 months).
13. Ramrambhiti or Ramramkati.
14. Bhangamura.
15. Lavankunja.
16. Madhupur.
17. Bhela (Bengal).
18. Kamlabari (Sibsagar, Upper Assam).

Besides these, four Shastras were made over by Madhav to Purusattam grandson of Sunkar by Ramananda Takur. These are—

1. Kuruhakuchi,
2. Lakhapur,
3. Gomura, and
4. Chaibari—in Kamrup.

2A. *Shastras founded by the Atahs under Madhav.*

(a) Bhavanan Atah :—

1. Jania (Rupasi Mouzah, Barpeta).
2. Kanara (Barpeta Mouzah).

(b) Harihar Atah :—

1. Majitimar (Kuch Behar).

(c) Gopal Atah afterwards known as Gopal Dev :—

In Barpeta—

1. Parabharal
2. Kaljar (Bhowanipur Mouzah).

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

3. Jowardi.

(d) Keshav Atah :—

1. Bhatkuchi (Upper Assam).

(e) Bar Vishnu Atah :—

1. Chamaria and

2. Malacha—in S. Kamrup.

(f) Behar Vishnu Atah *alias* Badla Atah :—

1. Kamlabari.

2. Badla.

3. Pachalia.

4. Colong.

5. Gujlang.

6. Joy Krishna's Bhiti.

7. Bali Shastra.

8. Dalaiguri—all in Upper Assam.

3. Damodar.

1. Patbaushi.

2. Barkapla (Sarukheshetri Mouzah, Barpeta).

3. Nowshastra (do).

4. Shingra (do).

3A. *Shastras either founded by or under the control of, the followers of Damodar.*

(a) Banshi Gopal was sent as Adhikar of Aunihati but he could not complete the Shastra there. It was after his

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

death that another disciple of Damodar really established it. The Aunihati Goswains however disavow being Damodarias.

(b) Baladev—was appointed Adhikar of (1) Damodarpur and (2) Baikuntapur in Kuch Behar.

(c) Bhagwan Dev—appointed to the Shastras of (1) Govindpur (Bajali Mouzah, Barpeta) and (2) Karsanna (same Mouzah).

(d) Shanta Dev—appointed Adhikar of Goremar* Shastra near Chamaria in S. Kamrup.

It is generally believed that the Shastras mentioned above were founded under the orders of Damodar by the persons against whose names they appear. The four Shastras of Dakshinpat, Goremar, Kuruabahi and Aunihati were founded by each one of four other followers of Damodar.

It must be stated here that as regards the authority of Damodar over the four Shastras of Aunihati, Goremar, Dakshinpat and Kuruabahi, it is called in question by some individuals, and the point will never be settled.

4. Hari Dev.

1. Mâhara.
2. Dakshinpar.
3. Narayanpur in Upper Assam.
4. Manari.

* Another Shastra of this name exists in Upper Assam.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

5. Bahai.
6. Baniya Kuchi.
7. Puala.
8. Haripur.
9. Sam Shastra.
10. Rampur.
11. Haldibari.
12. Lachima.
13. Maj Shastra.
14. Murar Shastra.
15. Shidpur.
16. Naptipara.
17. Jagra.
18. Pata.
19. Khana.
20. Bijkuchi.
21. Bahari.
22. Kaipati (Bara & Chota).
23. Kulbil.
24. Bali—all in Kamrup.

5. Gopal Dev.

1. Old Bhowanipore Shastra.
2. Kaljar.
3. Para.

The twelve Saru Barajanias were founded respectively by twelve disciples of Gopal Dev. Six of them were under Brahmins and six under Kaisthas. These are popularly known as the Dehingi Shastras of North Kamrup.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

PART IV.—A.

Genealogy of Sunkar from his earliest Ancestor traceable.

———:o:———

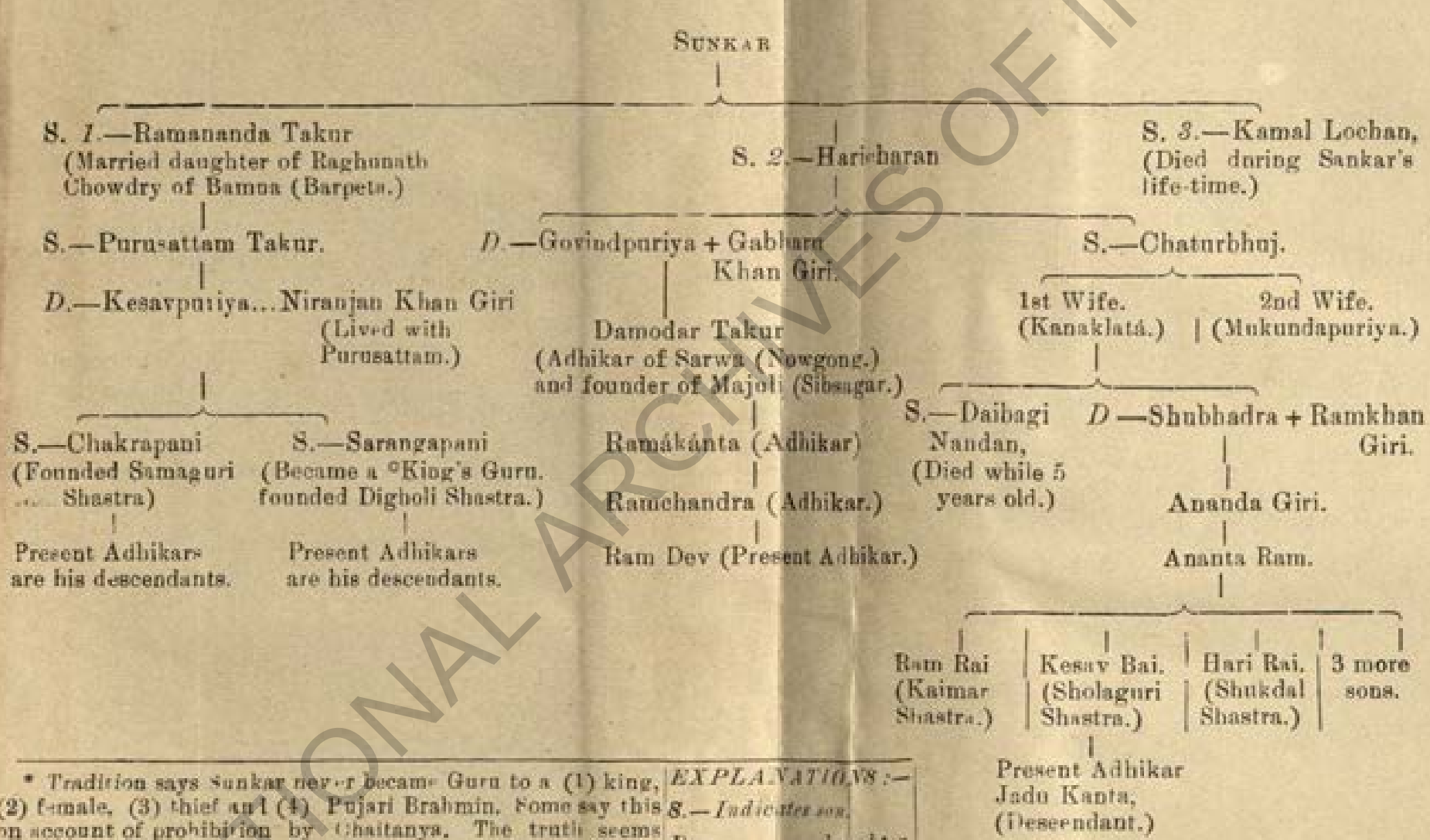
Shu-banga Giri (of Kanajpur)
|
S.—Maha Sankha Giri
|
S.—Atar Giri
|
S.—Shubansiri
|
S.—Dhanshiri
|
S.—Ram Giri
|
S.—Krishna Giri
|
S.—Hari Giri
|
D.—Krishnakanti Ai
|
S.—Landbar
|
S.—Chandivar (given as hostage to Goureshwar
|
S.—Rajyadhar
|
S.—Suryavar
|
S.—Kusam Giri
|
S.—Sunkar Dev.

Explanation.—"S"—indicates Son.
"D"— do Daughter.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Sunkar's Descendants.


SUNKAR
S. 1.—Ramananda Takur (Married daughter of Raghunath Chowdry of Bamua (Barpeta.)
S. 2.—Haricharan
S. 3.—Kamal Lochan, (Died during Sankar's life-time.)
S.—Purusattam Takur.
D.—Govindpuriya + Gabharu Khan Giri.
S.—Chaturbhuj.
D.—Kesavpuriya... Niranjan Khan Giri (Lived with Purusattam.)
Damodar Takur (Adhikar of Sarwa (Nowgong.) and founder of Majoli (Sibsagar.)
1st Wife. (Kanaklatá.)
2nd Wife. (Mukundapuriya.)
S.—Chakrapani (Founded Samaguri ... Shastra)
S.—Sarangapani (Became a *King's Guru. founded Digholi Shastra.)
Ramákánta (Adhikar)
S.—Daibagi Nandan, (Died while 5 years old.)
D—Shubhadra + Ramkhan Giri.
Present Adhikars are his descendants.
Present Adhikars are his descendants.
Ramchandra (Adhikar.)
Ananda Giri.
Ram Dev (Present Adhikar.)
Ananta Ram.
Ram Rai (Kaimar Shastra.)
Kesav Bai. (Sholaguri Shastra.)
Hari Rai. (Shukdal Shastra.)
3 more sons.
Present Adhikar Jadu Kanta, (Descendant.)

* *Tradition says Sankar never became Guru to a (1) king, (2) female, (3) thief and (4) Pujari Brahmin. Some say this on account of prohibition by Chaitanya. The truth seems to be that Sankar did not venture to encroach upon the authority of the Brahmins by becoming Guru to the four classes of individuals referred to above.*

EXPLANATIONS :—
S.— Indicates son.
D.— " daughter.
+— " marriage.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

PART IV.—C.

*Leading disciples and followers of Sunkar according to the Mahapurusiya account.**

—:o:—

* Some persons are disposed to take exception to this account in several respects and call it of doubtful accuracy although the grounds on which they would impeach it are not very clear.

BOMBAY BRANCH. R.A.S.
JACKSON MEMORIAL COLLECTION.
ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

00045509

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

Digitized with financial assistance from

NSDL
Technology, Trust & Reach

on 16 November, 2018